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Female sex offenders: Specialists, generalists and once-only offenders

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Abstract Little is known about the criminal careers of female sex offenders. A meta-analysis by Cortoni, Hanson and Coache revealed that about 1.5% of female sex offenders re-offend sexually. Even less is known about the extent to which female sex offenders' criminal careers contain sex offences as well as other offences, i.e. the extent of specialisation in sex offending. This study examines the criminal careers of all female sex offenders prosecuted by the criminal justice authorities in the Netherlands in the period 1994–2005. A latent class analysis shows that three subgroups of women can be distinguished: once-only offenders (who commit just one sex offence and no other offence), generalists (who combine sex offending with relatively many serious other, often violent, offences) and specialists (who commit relatively many sex offences next to some minor offences). Women in these three criminal career types differ in characteristics such as victimisation history, alcohol abuse and the sex of the victims.

Keywords Female sex offenders; criminal career; specialism; latent class analysis

Introduction

Almost all research on sex offending concerns male sex offenders (Daalder & Essers, 2003; Elliott, 1993; Finkelhor, Gelles, Hotaling, & Straus, 1983; Hunter, Becker, & Lexier, 2006; Marshall, Laws, & Barbaree, 1990). In the past few years, however, more attention has been directed, especially in Anglo-Saxon countries, towards women committing sexual offences. From these studies, which often employ small and clinical samples, we know that female sex offenders are generally characterised by a problematic background with experiences of (sexual) abuse and psychiatric disorders (Bumby & Bumby, 1997; Johansson-Love & Fremouw, 2006; Strickland, 2008). They abuse mainly (their own) children and they often co-offend with their romantic partner; for an overview of the literature see Wijkman, Bijleveld and Hendriks (2010).

Research concerning male sex offenders shows that there is no such thing as a typical sex offender: offenders differ in characteristics such as personality, offence and victim choice (Hilariski & Christensen, 2006; Keller, Theriot, & Dulmus, 2006; Ward & Beech, 2006). For

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instance, adult offenders with a prepubertal victim tend to have different motivation, risk profile and modus operandi (e.g. Bickley & Beech, 2001; Daalder & Essers, 2003) when compared with offenders with an adult victim. Such heterogeneity is also found for adult female sex offenders, who differ in victim choice, background characteristics and offence context (Sandler & Freeman, 2007; Vandiver & Kercher, 2004; Wijkman et al., 2010).

Criminal career research

In addition to the differences mentioned previously, offenders in general also differ in their criminal career. They differ in the extent to which their careers are characterised by specialisation (committing offences of the same type) or generality (committing offences of different types) (Guerette, Stenius, & McGloin, 2005; Mazerolle, Brame, Paternoster, Piquero, & Dean, 2000; Piquero, 2000). Sex offenders tend to specialise more than other offenders, as they relatively frequently re-offend sexually when compared with non-sex offenders (Hanson, Scott, & Steffy, 1995; Langan, Schmitt, & Durose, 2003; Sample & Bray, 2003). Some sex offenders specialise more than others (Harris, Smallbone, Dennison, & Knight, 2009; Lussier, 2005; Miethe, Olson, & Mitchell, 2006; Soothill, Francis, Sanderson, & Ackerley, 2000): child abusers, for instance, tend to specialise more than sex offenders with an older or adult victim (Knight & Prentky, 1993; Knight & Sims-Knight, 2003).

Specialisation has been investigated mainly through recidivism studies. Such studies have the disadvantage that they investigate only the first new offence and do not take into account any patterning of offences over the entire career. In addition, recidivism studies may be difficult to compare because of differences in follow-up time and sample composition (Lussier, 2005). As far as we are aware, only Soothill et al. (2000) have researched the entire criminal career of male sex offenders. They showed that (excluding offenders convicted of the idiosyncratic offence “indecent between males”) 44% ($n=2606$) exhibited a specialist offending pattern [we calculated the number of specialists ourselves by using Table 3 of Soothill et al.’s (2000) paper].

Specialisation in female sex offenders

Little is known about the extent to which female sex offenders specialise in sex offending. Cortoni, Hanson and Coache (in press) combined the limited research on re-offending by female sex offenders and found that 1.5% re-offend sexually over an average follow-up period of 5.9 years. Male sex offenders have considerably higher percentages of sexually re-offending, averaging about 13.5%, over a mean follow-up period of 5.5 years (Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005). However, these percentages cannot be interpreted as an indication of the extent to which offenders specialise in sex offending. These figures do not tell us anything about the number of sex offences committed before the sampling offence, after the recidivism offence, nor do they—with the exception of Cortoni et al. (in press)—tell us about any non-sexual offences. Based on what is known for male sex offenders on the association between background characteristics and the extent to which they specialise in sex offending, we may expect that females differ in the extent to which they specialise.

To study this is important from a theoretical point of view. Very little is known about female sex offenders and their criminal careers. Because of this, researchers, practitioners and psychologists run the risk of generalizing characteristics from male sex offenders to female sex offenders. As such, females sometimes receive the same risk assessment and treatment as male sex offenders. In so doing, female sex offenders are considered as sex offenders who are by chance female, and not as a female who committed a sex offence (Eldridge & Ashfield, 2010).

However, research about general and violent female offending shows overwhelmingly that males and females differ in onset, development and persistence of their criminal careers—they should therefore be considered as two different groups with different risk profiles and treatment needs (Salisbury & Van Voorhis, 2009; Steffensmeier & Allan, 1996). Such a differentiation should therefore also be made concerning male and female sex offenders.

A number of the differences between male and female sex offenders can be expected when examining empirical data from the Netherlands, the country where our study was conducted. First, only about 15% of Dutch female sex offenders have an ethnic minority background (Wijkman et al., 2010), while for male sex offenders this is approximately 50% (Wijk & Blokland, 2008). Offenders with an ethnic Dutch background are involved more frequently in paedosexual offences when compared with non-ethnic Dutch offenders (Leuw, Bijl, & Daalder, 2004). We also know that offenders of paedosexual offences specialise more towards sex offences (Harris et al., 2009; Lussier, LeBlanc, & Proulx, 2005). When ethnic background is connected in a similar manner with specialisation in female sex offenders as it is in male sex offenders, this would lead us to expect that relatively many females would specialise in sex offending because they have a non-ethnic Dutch background more often than do male sex offenders.

Secondly, police data show that about half of all suspects of a sex offence with multiple offenders are adult males (Bijleveld & Soudijn, 2008). Relatively more female offenders (65%) offend with a co-offender, mainly male, and often their romantic partner (Wijkman et al., 2010). The presence of an antisocial partner in these women's lives might imply that these women themselves run the risk of becoming involved in the antisocial behaviour of their partner, and thus develop a generalistic offending pattern.

Conversely, as the co-offender is often the woman's romantic partner, and as they often abuse their own children, the offending might more easily become a repeated or chronic pattern of offending, which would render the criminal career more specialistic. In addition to the latter, relatively many female sex offenders have been traumatised, function at a low intellectual level and suffer from psychological and/or psychiatric disorders; furthermore, female sex offenders are, on average, strongly dependent on their partner (Gannon, Rose, & Ward, 2008; Mathews, Matthews, & Speltz, 1989; Wijkman et al., 2010). This susceptibility, combined with functioning at an intellectually low level, may render the woman more susceptible to pressure as exerted by her partner during the abuse of her children. All in all, the presence of the co-offending partner could thus work both ways.

Consequently, it can be observed that there are multiple reasons to assume that female sex offenders will develop a different offending pattern than male sex offenders, and that they may tend to specialise more often than do males. This could imply that female sex offenders should be considered and treated differently to male sex offenders.

In this paper we will investigate to what extent adult female sex offenders specialise in sex offending and to what extent they can be characterised as generalists. We will also investigate whether specialisation and generalistic offending patterns are associated with personal and offence characteristics.

Method

Sample

Our starting sample was composed of 672 criminal prosecution cases registered between 1994 and 2005 with the Netherlands central prosecution service, involving adult female defendants of at least one sexual offence. As such, in a statistical sense, we have not studied a sample but

rather the entire population of registered female sex offenders in the Netherlands for those years. Of these 672 registered cases, 598 cases could be linked to a criminal record. Ten per cent of these suspects were acquitted and for 33% the prosecution was dropped for “technical reasons”, which implies that the prosecutor dropped the case due to insufficient evidence making an acquittal almost certain. This left 337 “unique” female sex offenders. Most of these offenders were hands-off offenders only, prosecuted mainly for human trafficking (these crimes are part of the chapter on sex offending in the Dutch penal code).

We ended up with 135 adult females who were registered for at least one hands-on sexual offence. For some of these women, their case was dismissed by the prosecutor for policy reasons; for instance, the defendant had started therapy or had paid damages to the victim. Cases under this uniquely Dutch system of prosecutorial expediency are counted as convicted cases in academic research in the Netherlands (Wartna, Blom, & Tollenaar, 2008). The Netherlands does not have plea bargaining, so the offence categorisation under which an offence is registered can be assumed to reflect the actual offence. In addition to obtaining the criminal career information, we analysed the prosecution and court files for all 135 females. Permission for the study was obtained from the Prosecutor General and the Minister of Justice.

The vast majority of perpetrators were ethnic Dutch (84%, $n = 113$). The remaining 16% had a different ethnicity and came from Turkey ($n = 2$), Surinam ($n = 4$), the Netherlands Antilles ($n = 5$), from other West European or African countries ($n = 10$) or were of mixed ethnicity ($n = 1$). The most common final educational level was elementary school, which is exceptionally low for the Netherlands, or special education ($n = 64$). More than half the women ($n = 74$) were married or involved in a relationship; 21% ($n = 28$) were divorced. Forty per cent ($n = 56$) of women had children. At the time of the sampling offence the women were aged, on average, 35 years.

Variables and measuring instruments

From the court files, offender and offence variables were scored using the scoring tool for sex offenders developed previously and used extensively in various studies by Hendriks and Bijleveld (2006), supplemented by a number of variables particularly important for female sex offenders, such as relationship with and characteristics of any co-offender(s). Court files in the Netherlands always contain the charge as well as the judicial decision, in which what offence the defendant was charged with is specified and in the case of a court verdict was found guilty of, as well as a verbal description of what behavioural acts were determined proven by the court. Each court file contains a detailed charge by the prosecutor, which lists the acts purportedly committed by the defendant, entailing an exact description of the physical acts committed, against which victims, whose name and date and place of birth are given as well as their relationship to the offender, alongside where the offending took place and relevant dates and times. Almost every court file contains transcripts of the police hearings of the offender, reports by each involved police officer of his or her findings (*proces verbaal*) at each step of the case, together with victim and sometimes witness statements. If a defendant had had contact with the probation service (the *Reclassering* in the Netherlands, which is an organisation that also assists defendants and convicts in addition to serving as a supervisory organisation), probation reports were also present. If the prosecutor, judge or lawyer requests psychological or psychiatric screening, the court file also contains the psychiatric and/or psychological reports. These screenings are not compulsory. Such screenings are carried out by certified psychologists/psychiatrists by appointment of the Ministry of Justice, at the request of the prosecutor, judge or even the lawyer. Personality assessments are based on

standard tests used in Dutch clinical assessments, such as the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale for intelligence and the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory for personality characteristics. Clinical judgements are included.

The factual information in the court files was extracted by the first two researchers assisted by three master's students (criminology and/or clinical psychology). Each had been trained in analysing and scoring court files. Scores on norm-validated instruments, such as the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale, were coded into ordinal Dutch population norm values. After the quantitative coding of data, a short qualitative description was made of all index offences.

Court files were studied before criminal career information was retrieved from the centralised criminal record files at the Netherlands Judicial Information service to prevent any bias in the coding process. A criminal record file contains all offences ever registered by the Prosecution Service for a person, starting at age 12 years, which is the age of criminal responsibility in the Netherlands. We again excluded acquittals and technical dismissals. We combined information from the court files and criminal career files to estimate the number of times a woman had committed a sex offence in her lifetime. If we were not sure about the exact number, we always scored the lowest possible number (i.e. if it said in a court file "several", this was coded as "2"), so it is possible that we underestimated the number of sex offences.

Analysis

To describe the characteristics of the group of female sex offenders we used frequency counts. To examine specialisation and generalisation in offending, we used latent class analysis (LCA). With LCA a group of offenders is divided into a limited, preset number of classes. The technique assumes that the scores on the observed (or manifest) categorical variables are not correlated, given the latent class to which a person belongs. As such, LCA can be seen as a factor-analytical technique in which the latent and manifest variables are nominal.

The observed variables are the frequencies at which the female sex offenders have committed various offences over their entire criminal career. Subsequently, the technique tries to classify the offenders into groups that share combinations of offending patterns; for example, a group with only sex offences, or a group with mainly other offences. We imposed a restriction on the LCA in that we requested the offenders who committed one and only one sex offence and no other offence to be classified into a separate group. This is because such "once-only" offenders do not have a criminal "career" as such.

A final, optimal model is chosen after several models (e.g. with a different number of classes, or with different restrictions) have been compared. Models are first compared to determine whether they fit the data at all. This is conducted using the χ^2 test. Next, given a set of fitting models, the optimal model is picked. This is performed employing three criteria, namely the likelihood ratio (LR), the parametric bootstrap (pb)LR and the Bayes' information criterion (BIC), where the model with the lowest BIC is preferred.

Finally, using the posterior probabilities (the proportion of people within a class who score within a certain category of a manifest variable), we can interpret the classes. Apart from technical considerations, interpretability also plays a role in model selection. For more on LCA, see McCutcheon (1987).

The manifest variables we incorporated are the numbers of hands-on sex offences, hands-off sex offences, serious offences and minor offences. Serious and minor offences are distinguished based on the maximum sentence they carry in the Netherlands. The category of serious offences consists of, for instance, murder, manslaughter, violent offences and drugs

offences. Minor offences, for example, are common theft, vandalism and public order offences (Heiden-Attema & Bol, 2000).

After the LCA, we investigated whether women in different latent classes differ on personal, offence or background characteristics using χ^2 tests for nominal variables and independent-sample t -tests for interval level variables. For the χ^2 test a standardised residual score larger than 2 is considered as an indication for an existing difference. Only significant results at the 5% level are reported. When directional tests are employed, this is reported. When classes on the various characteristics are compared, we compare all classes. However, when differences concerning criminal career characteristics such as criminal career duration are discussed, the once-only offenders are excluded because they do not have a criminal career.

Results

Offender, offence and victim characteristics

According to the psychological and psychiatric reports, 42% ($n=52$) of the female sex offenders functioned at a below-average or borderline intellectual level. About half the women (48%, $n=65$) had an Axis I (e.g. depression or alcohol addiction) or Axis II disorder (e.g. mental retardation or borderline personality disorder). For 19% ($n=26$) comorbidity was reported. More than one-quarter ($n=35$) of the women had been neglected in childhood, 13% ($n=17$) were physically abused and 22% ($n=30$) were sexually abused; more than one-third ($n=48$) had experienced some kind of abuse or neglect. Current drug abuse (hard drugs and/or soft drugs) was reported by 10% ($n=13$). Data on alcohol abuse were not collected. Working as a prostitute, on average for five years, was reported by 13% ($n=18$) of the offenders. About 18% ($n=24$) of the offenders had had a partner who physically abused them and almost a quarter ($n=32$) reported a currently violent partner.

The median age of the victims was 13 years (range = 0–60 years). In 44% ($n=59$) of the cases the victims were intrafamilial and 47% ($n=64$) were extrafamilial. For 9% ($n=12$) the link with the victim was unknown. Males were victimised by 30% ($n=37$) of the women, 58% ($n=72$) had a female victim and 12% ($n=15$) had both male and female victims; 26% ($n=35$) of the offenders abused more than one victim. For 12 women we had no information about the nature of the offending. More than a quarter ($n=39$) of the women was a solo offender, 51% ($n=69$) a co-offender and 12% ($n=15$) an accomplice (meaning that she knowingly facilitated the offence). For all offences, criminal intent was assumed by the criminal justice authorities. A majority (55%, $n=74$) of the co-offenders was the romantic partner of the woman. In commission of the offence, verbal violence was employed by 24% ($n=32$) and 18% ($n=24$) used physical violence.

LCA

Table I gives an overview of the various latent class models with increasing numbers of classes, all with the restriction that women who had committed only one sex offence and no other offences must be placed into a separate class. We assess the solutions as described above using the BIC, the values of the LR and the pb LR.

Model 2 and model 3 have similar BIC values, with model 3 fitting slightly better. The models with four and five classes have distinctly worse BIC values and are less parsimonious. The LR and pb(LR) are better in model 3 than in model 2. For these three reasons, we chose model 3, the model with three classes, as the best model.

Table I. Diagnostics of latent class analysis (LCA) models with different numbers of classes.

Model	BIC	LR	pb(LR)	Df
2	881.33	55.80	0.69	62
3	881.12	26.30	0.99	56
4	894.41	20.05	0.99	52
5	904.13	15.13	0.99	49

BIC: Bayes’ information criterion; LR: likelihood ratio; pb: parametric bootstrap; df: degrees of freedom.

Table II gives the distribution of the respondents over the classes as well as the posterior probabilities, i.e. the proportion of women within a class who score within a certain category of the manifest variable.

The first row of Table II shows that of 135 female sex offenders, 16% ($n=22$) are placed in class 1, 27% ($n=36$) in class 2 and 57% ($n=77$) in class 3.

Class 1 is the class with women who were convicted for only one sex offence. These women we name the “once-only” offenders; we constrained the technique as explained above to generate this class.

In the second class a majority of women committed only one sex offence; almost all women committed multiple other non-sexual offences. Although a further 42% of the respondents committed two or more sex offences, we see that without exception all offenders committed a serious offence next to the sex offence: 39% committed one serious offence and 61% even two or more. Many offenders (89%) committed minor offences. Remarkably, no offender in this class committed a hands-off offence. Because of the versatility in offending and the large number of committed offences, we label the offenders in this class “generalists”.

The third class is the class with offenders who committed the most sex offences. Almost two-thirds committed two or more sex offences and 40% five or more. Remarkably, this is the only class in which women are placed who also committed hands-off offences: in court files we read that in most cases these were women who, during the abuse, took pictures or produced

Table II. Distribution of female sex offenders over the classes and the proportion of women per class within the categories of the offence variables.

	1. Once-only (16.3%)	2. Generalists (26.7%)	3. Specialists (57.0%)
Hands-on			
1 offence	1.00	.58	.35
2–4 offences	.00	.38	.25
5 or more offences	.00	.04	.40
Hands-off			
No offences	1.00	1.00	.87
1 or more offences	.00	.00	.13
Serious offences			
No offences	1.00	.00	.93
1 offence	.00	.39	.07
2 or more offences	.00	.61	.00
Minor offences			
No offences	1.00	.11	.62
1 offence	.00	.19	.17
2–4 offences	.00	.13	.17
5 or more offences	.00	.57	.04

videos of the abuse. Offenders in this third class committed hardly any serious crimes and a minority has been convicted for a minor offence. Some women committed only one sex offence, but because these had also committed at least one other offence, they could not be placed in class 1. All in all, as these women committed mainly (many) sex offences and generally few other crimes, we call them the “specialists”.

Thus, we see that we indeed find more (57%) specialists than had been found within males (Soothill et al., 2000). This shows that within the group of female sex offenders there are relatively many specialists: if we disregard the 16% once-only offenders, as they could not have been classified as specialists or generalists, the percentage of specialist female sex offenders increases to 68%.

In the following we will investigate whether women in the different classes differ on pertinent personal, offence and criminal career characteristics.

Differences in background characteristics between female sex offender classes

Specialists have experienced more sexual abuse in their childhood ($\chi^2_{(2)} = 5.93$, $p < .05$, one-tailed) and more frequently have a delinquent partner ($\chi^2_{(2)} = 9.56$, $p < .05$). Generalistic offenders, on the other hand, belong more often to an ethnic minority ($\chi^2_{(2)} = 7.08$, $p < .05$), have used drugs more frequently ($\chi^2_{(2)} = 9.48$, $p < .01$) and have been physically maltreated more often in their childhood ($\chi^2_{(2)} = 6.97$, $p < .05$).

This indicates, similarly to that found in male sex offenders, that there is a link between ethnicity and specialistic offending: ethnic-Dutch women are more frequently specialists, and minority women more often generalists. We see that specialists, as has been found for male sex child abusers, are characterised by traumatic experiences, notably sexual abuse in childhood. There was no relation between class membership and IQ, susceptibility, or Axis I or Axis II disorders.

Differences in offence and victim characteristics between female sex offender classes

Women who co-offended with a male intimate partner were more frequently specialists ($\chi^2_{(2)} = 5.70$, $p < .05$, one-tailed). Specialists more frequently offended against victims of both sexes ($\chi^2_{(2)} = 9.48$, $p < .05$) and they often had victims with whom they were acquainted ($\chi^2_{(2)} = 5.24$, $p < .05$, one-tailed). These differences are as expected. No other differences were found between the classes and offence characteristics.

Differences in criminal career characteristics between specialists and generalists

The average age of the female offenders at the sampling offence was, as reported above, 35 years. The mean follow-up period was 11 years. This means that the women were on average about 46 years old at the end of our follow-up period, and that our entire observation period, with 12 years as the age of criminal responsibility, was 34 years. Investigating differences between generalists and specialists, it appears that generalists started offending at a significantly younger age (30.02) than specialists (34.22): ($t_{(111)} = -2.282$, $p < .05$). The length of the criminal career (defined as the time-period between last and first conviction, corrected for incarceration and intramural treatment) of the women was on average 3.9 years [standard deviation (s.d.) = 5.4]. The criminal career of generalists and specialists differed ($t_{(47.047)} = 3.261$, $p < .005$): the career length of the generalists is significantly longer.

Before the sampling offence, generalists had been more criminally active than specialists (4.4 versus 1.5 offences; $t_{(27.479)} = 1.994$, $p < .05$, one-tailed); the difference was not due to

their longer career length before the sampling offence. It was due mainly to generalists committing more property offences ($\chi^2_{(1)} = 7.152, p < .05$). No other differences in criminal career characteristics were found between generalists and specialists.

Discussion

We were able to examine a group of hands-on female sex offenders ($n = 135$) who constitute statistically the entire population of known convicted female sex offenders in the Netherlands. We collected relatively rich data from the court files that often contained psychological screenings and precise descriptions of the offences committed, victims and co-offenders. For the women in our sample, criminal career information spanned a long period; on average 34 years.

The group of female sex offenders had experienced traumas relatively often in childhood. The rate of victimisation of sexual abuse is, however, relatively low (22%) compared to findings from other studies (Bumby & Bumby, 1997; Kaplan & Green, 1995; Matthews, Matthews, & Speltz, 1991). Perhaps this is caused by the fact that we have not studied a clinical sample, which is often the case in other studies. Comparable to findings from other studies (Matthews, 1998; Sandler & Freeman, 2007; Vandiver, 2006) is that many of the women in our study suffered from mental disorders (such as depression or a borderline personality disorder) and that most offended against (their own) children. Also, many offended with a male co-offender, who was often their romantic partner.

The LCA generated a model with three classes, of which one had been restricted explicitly to consist of women who had committed one sex offence only. As expected, a relatively large number of women were classified as specialists. Besides the sex offence, generalists had all committed at least one serious offence. In addition, many also committed relatively minor offences such as shoplifting, traffic offences and receiving stolen goods. Their sex offending was more often against unknown victims compared with the two other groups of offenders. They had started their criminal careers relatively early. With these features, these women correspond to the general prototype of the antisocial offender. Given their versatile offending pattern and their relatively higher preference for an unknown victim, this group resembles most clearly the profile of adult male rapists (Miethe et al., 2006).

The specialists are women who have committed multiple sex offences, some of them over a relatively long period, and have committed few other offences and, if so, mainly minor offences. Most of these women had offended against victims who are acquaintances or family. Given this victim preference, increased levels of sexual abuse victimisation and the long period over which sex offending continues, in a sense these women resemble male (juvenile) child abusers (Harris et al., 2009; Lussier et al., 2005).

While part of our findings are in the expected direction and correspond to findings for male sex offenders, it is striking that we found so few other differences between the offender groups in terms of personality characteristics, age, etc. Part of this may be due, in an absolute sense, to the low N in our study. Another explanation may be the prominent presence of a male co-offender for many of these women. It might be that, if these women “followed” the preferences of their partners, their own characteristics do not associate very strongly to their offence patterning and it may be their co-offenders’ characteristics that are more important.

A second remarkable finding is that the class of once-only offenders was indistinguishable from the other two sex offender classes on background, personality, offence and victim characteristics. Again, the small class size may have made it harder for significant differences to emerge. However, this also raises the question of whether they are not a “mixture” of the

other two types. They could be a mixture in the sense that they are not once-only offenders, but actually starters for whom a generalistic or specialistic offending pattern still has to develop. However, the once-only offenders are not (significantly) younger than the generalistic and specialistic offenders. They could thus also constitute a mixture in the sense that their single sex offence is the only offence that became known to the justice authorities. All in all, it is difficult to profile the group of once-only offenders.

This study covers an entire population of female hands-on sex offenders, whose criminal careers we were able to study over 34 years. Despite the large temporal coverage we must keep in mind that, perhaps even more than with male sex offenders (Allen, 1991; Bumby & Bumby, 1997; Kaplan & Green, 1995), only a very small part of their sexual offences is reported to the police. Also, we could not identify all background, personality, offence and victim characteristics for all offenders, as not all offenders underwent psychological screening. This means that we may have underestimated issues such as (sexual abuse) victimisation and disorders. Lastly, we could not always assess unambiguously from the criminal records how many (sex) offences a woman had committed previously. In those cases we counted conservatively: obviously, we may thus have underestimated offending frequency.

We believe that the group of specialists may actually comprise further, qualitatively different, types of specialist sex offenders. Some of the female sex offenders ended up in this group because they had abused their own child repeatedly, in a similar fashion, over a number of years. Other female sex offenders had lured various neighbourhood children at different occasions to their home and abused them. Again, others had abused handicapped children who had been entrusted to them. These women—while all repeatedly committing sexual abuse—exhibit different *modus operandi* and differ in the number of different victims and other relevant offence characteristics. They may also differ in terms of personal and other characteristics. As these different kinds of specialist offender are all combined in one class and analysed as a whole, this may have obscured existing differences. Given the number in our study, qualitative research into these various manifestations of specialisation seems more suited to exploring this further.

Paraphilia was diagnosed in only three cases (two women with paedophilia and one with paraphilia not otherwise specified). It is well known that women are diagnosed less frequently than men with some kind of paraphilia, with a ratio of about 1:30 (Abel & Osborn, 2000). Despite the fact that paraphilia may be underdiagnosed in women, this absence of paraphilia could also indicate that perhaps female sex offenders have sexual motives less often when compared with male sex offenders (O'Connor, 1987). More research into the sexual and other motives of female sex offenders appears warranted.

This absence or lesser importance of sexual motives might also indicate that the treatment of female sex offenders should perhaps focus less on the sexual aspects of the offence, but more on the other features (Lawson, 2008). For example, with specialists the treatment could focus on decreasing the susceptibility of the women with respect to their partner and to set limits or boundaries for her children and herself. With generalists, treatment should perhaps focus more on antisocial aspects. However, both groups have numerous psychological problems, implying that an offence-focused treatment seems insufficient. It is possible that these women, more than male sex offenders, need psychiatric or psychological treatment.

We conclude, first, that relatively many female sex offenders appear to specialise in sex offending. Secondly, we conclude that generalisation and specialisation appear to associate in a partly similar fashion to personal and offence characteristics in female sex offenders as they are known to do in male sex offenders. There are also differences. The most striking difference is the frequently active presence of a male co-offender.

The presence of this co-offender has two implications. First, the presence of a co-offender fundamentally alters the setting in which the abuse is committed, so that issues of dominance, fear and susceptibility may take precedence over sexual or violent motives. Secondly, as explained above, the characteristics of the woman herself and their association with the offence may become “blurred” with those of her co-offender. The motives of female sex offenders, their co-offenders and the interaction between the offenders should also become a focus of future research on female sex offending. Such research would perhaps contribute most to understanding the aetiology of female sex offending.

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